

Walters, Bradley B., with Bonnie J. McCay, Paige West, and Susan Lees (eds): *Against the Grain: The Vayda Tradition in Human Ecology and Ecological Anthropology*

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V. Constanza Ocampo-Raeder

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The volume *Against the Grain: The Vayda Tradition in Human Ecology and Ecological Anthropology* presents a series of chapters based on a special AAA panel held in honor of the retirement of Andrew (Pete) Vayda. The volume focuses on Vayda's later works and centers on the usefulness of contextualizing key events to explain human–environment interactions. The chapters represent a well-chosen array of themes and cases studies so that one does not need to be a follower of the “Vayda tradition” to find the volume informative and worth reading.

The case studies cover a wide-range of issues ranging from tropical deforestation, garment trade, and poultry industries to agroecology and invasive species. The authors apply Vayda's event analysis method to examine their individual cases. The result is a combination of examples that argue for the value of this method and examples that highlight some limitations. The book is broadly organized around three sections that address the trajectory of the Vayda tradition, issues surrounding event analysis in articulating casual explanations, and applications to conservation and development. However, chapters could also be grouped according to more specific themes and this review reflects my reading of the volume and does not necessarily follow the order of the book.

The intellectual path of Vayda's work and contributions is explored early in the book. Chapter 1, by Bonnie McCay, best represents the notion of “Against the Grain,” with a thorough review of Vayda's intellectual trajectory and contributions. She points out that Vayda is a scholar who

has not hesitated to respond “against” certain paradigms that have emerged in ecological anthropology over the last decades. Richard Scaglione (Chapter 2) builds on these points by adding that Vayda's initial works continue to stand the test of time especially when pertaining to cross-cultural variability and the need for recognizing humans as critical agents in environmental change. Addressing a more contemporary debate, Bradley Walters (Chapter 4) critiques current approaches in political ecology that emphasize the role of political factors in explaining human–environment interactions. Using a case study in the Philippines, he provides compelling evidence for non-political factors that motivated certain communities to plant mangroves. Walters lays out a familiar and controversial argument (see Vayda and Walters 1999) that favors event ecology and open-ended research questions instead of theory-driven studies that dominates political ecology.

Central to the approach laid out in event ecology is the difference between event-ethnography and traditional ethnographic methods. Thomas McGuire (Chapter 7) critically examines the value of event-based ethnographic research that incorporates deep contextual analysis by comparing investigative journalism and anthropological inquiry. By focusing on a court case tried in Louisiana, McGuire shows that although investigative journalism may initially seem to be better equipped in tracing the causes behind an event, it can ultimately fail to elucidate the deeper context. Paul Roscoe (Chapter 9) also addresses some key points concerning ethnographic data. His chapter praises Vayda for being a rare scholar who is not afraid to revise past conclusions and goes on to revisit some of his own work in Papua New Guinea. However, he notes that revising previous conclusions can be problematic as ethnographic data remain highly subjective because the ethnographer controls what is observed and represented. Discussions

V. C. Ocampo-Raeder (✉)
Department of Anthropology, University of Maine,
5773 South Stevens Hall,
Orono, ME 04469-5773, USA
e-mail: constanza@umit.maine.edu

throughout the book provide important insights into the backbone of our discipline's methodology, but the issue of what the ethnographic process should entail on the ground, particularly when carrying out event analysis or question-driven research, is not fully addressed in any chapter.

Vayda's work also addresses the problems associated with a priori judgments and theory-driven research, and Endre Nyerges (Chapter 5), focusing on the history of Western African forests, explores these problems in revisionist studies that overgeneralize situations. He concludes that a more accurate understanding of the human ecology of the Guinea Savanna can be obtained through event analysis, remote sensing, and ecological data. Two chapters take a more philosophical stance in evaluating some of Vayda's concerns with theory-driven research. Lawrence Kuznar and Kenneth Long (Chapter 10) compare casual-mechanical explanations, as proposed by Vayda, to deductive-nomological (DN) explanations. Their conclusions emphasize the importance of theory-driven research yet note the need to consider both strategies when seeking adequate explanations in ecological anthropology. Catherine Driscoll and Stephen Stich (Chapter 11) also offer a philosophical critique of Vayda's arguments against DN approaches in Darwinian Ecological Anthropology. They support DN approaches and argue for its usefulness, but agree with Vayda that proximate factors often contest conclusions.

Progressive contextualization as a method is addressed in several chapters that apply it directly to specific case studies. Gunnar Haaland (Chapter 3) explores key historical events, such as migration, to explain the dominance of Nepalese-owned garment businesses in Thailand. Haaland espouses the benefits of deep contextualization and ethnographic observation in identifying and tracing an event. The result of his analysis is a multi-level "casual history" of events that include influences from a variety of sources (local and non-local). Expanding on the more conventional approach to progressive contextualization, Gerard Persoon and Padmapani Perez (Chapter 17) explore the possibility of considering future scenarios in addition to historical context. They examine the case of a large conservation project in Central Kalimantan (Indonesia) and discuss the importance of considering a population's future goals since historical information is often unavailable or may not be the most relevant context to explore.

An underlying theme in some chapters that directly apply notions of progressive contextualization is how to choose an appropriate event and how much context should a researcher pursue in seeking explanations. Paige West (Chapter 13) begins with a striking incident in which a man cuts down a tree that contains the nest of an endangered species. Although her initial questions are not completely answered, her analysis does arrive at a persuasive conclu-

sion that shows that the incident was a product of diverging perspectives regarding conservation, as well as social transformations caused by decades of intervention by conservation initiatives. The following chapter, by Michael Dove and collaborators, also highlights the need to consider the variability of conservation "ideologies" when evaluating an event. Through an examination of case studies in Asia and Latin America they reveal the critical role of human agency in the development of conservation-related discourses, but also note that in the case of event analysis the process of choosing an event must be acknowledged as a social construct.

A number of chapters apply event ecology to situations where human activities result in different environmental impacts or resource management patterns. David Bart (Chapter 6) seeks to understand the role of human activities in spreading invasive species. He begins by pointing out that ecologists tend to lump human activities into broad categories that poorly represent their variability and possible impacts. In the case of invasive species, he shows that event analysis can provide a better understanding of the complex causes that foster invasions. Yet he cautions against considering event ecology a "panacea," since information needed (context) is often unavailable or difficult to obtain. Similarly, Christine Padoch, Miguel Pinedo-Vasquez and Andrew Roberts (Chapter 8) consider event analysis by tracing the chain of events behind the development of a unique agricultural pattern in Brazil. However, they find that event analysis does not provide a complete explanation for the occurrence of this pattern because it obscures the overarching process of change in agroecosystems. Nevertheless, they do note that "context-rich" ethnographic examinations provide valuable insights into understanding human decision-making in response to environmental changes. The chapter by Indah Setyawati (18) looks at in situ conservation of rice varieties in a Borneo village to show that event analysis best explains why people maintain or discard certain crop varieties over time. Although her initial critique of indigenous knowledge is problematic, her analysis of the case in question does provide interesting insights into why certain crops are maintained in spite of not being needed for consumption at a particular time.

Finally, the question of how to make anthropological insights more relevant and applicable to solving problems on the ground is explicitly addressed by several authors. Cristina Eghenter (Chapter 12) looks at conservation projects in Indonesia to raise the question of what kind of anthropology can best inform conservation and development projects. She emphasizes the usefulness of investigating historical context to reveal casual links behind events. Patricia Vondal (Chapter 15) examines the poultry industry in Borneo to show the kinds of insights progressive contextualization can provide to understand the implementation and success of a project. Her chapter proposes an interesting four-step

approach to determining a “sequence of activities” that can help evaluate rural development enterprises. Carol Pierce Colfer (Chapter 16) explores forest management policies in Indonesia to show how policy-makers undertake projects with a limited understanding of sociocultural conditions. To illustrate her point and suggest solutions, she applies the lessons of progressive contextualization to notions of Adaptive Collaborative Management. Pierce Colfer argues that when local populations are directly involved in the process of analyzing problems, through progressive contextualization, they can effectively contribute to the design of solutions.

The book concludes with a chapter by Vayda himself where he responds to some of the points made throughout the volume. He primarily addresses philosophical arguments regarding the merits of casual versus deductive-nomological explanations. He raises topics he has previously addressed elsewhere, in particular his critique of political ecology, human behavioral ecology, and spiritual ecology. Although this chapter presents slightly updated information, proponents or opponents of the approaches critiqued are unlikely to be swayed. Nevertheless, Vayda does provide an interesting and more conciliatory discussion on the importance of combining different methodological approaches and the kinds of casual explanations event analysis can yield.

Vayda’s final chapter surprised me in one respect, given that several of the volume’s contributors were his students and that many of his landmark contributions were published with them, I was expecting some discussion on how this collaboration may have impacted the development of his ideas. The input of an advisor is often critical to interpreting key observations (or events in this case) and invaluable to making sense of the ethnographic process. However, being exposed to new field sites and different perspectives is also likely to influence the advisor, a matter rarely discussed

when examining the evolution of a scholar’s ideas. Vayda’s tendency to go “against the grain” and ability to strategically position his ideas within existing debates may have been in part a product of the type of collaboration he created with his students. Clearly, Vayda is a dedicated mentor and collaborator and what emerges from the volume is that part of his legacy is rooted in many of these relationships.

Overall, the volume does a good job of critiquing yet also drawing attention to the value of considering events and context as a way to explain human–environmental interactions. The cases presented illustrate that this method can result in clear and structured arguments that highlight important social and historical processes. However, in my opinion, the causal explanations proposed within are also often limiting. If event analysis is implemented in isolation, certain units of analysis may be underestimated and important ecological, economic, and socio-cultural dynamics can be overlooked. The conclusions presented in many chapters would have been enhanced, or even changed altogether, if insights from historical ecology, resource management studies, economic anthropology, and indeed political ecology had been incorporated. Nonetheless, although I do not subscribe to the Vayda “tradition” per se, I am persuaded to consider the value of framing analysis around a particular event as a way to present my findings and possibly complement my own methodological approaches and theoretical position. The volume is a resource that is likely to be referenced frequently by researchers and individual chapters will provide excellent reading material for courses in ecological anthropology.

Reference

- Vayda, A., and Walters, B. (1999). Against Political Ecology. *Human Ecology* 27: 167–179.